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ABSTRACT

This digest offers guidelines to parents of gifted children which emphasize respecting the child's individuality while providing necessary support. A new definition of giftedness is cited which stresses the asynchronous development of such children's cognitive skills and the resultant qualitatively different inner experience. Early signs of giftedness are listed and the advantages of early identification noted. Suggestions are offered for responsive parenting which provides a wide variety of stimulation while following the child's lead. Discussion then looks at first, the role of family relationships in the child's development and issues concerning school placement including early entrance, other forms of acceleration, and the value of mixed age groups. Finally, the role of parents in advocacy is noted. Three references and two organizational resources are listed. (DB)

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HOW PARENTS CAN SUPPORT GIFTED CHILDREN

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Raising and nurturing a gifted child can be an exciting yet daunting challenge. Unfortunately, these complicated little people do not come with instruction manuals. The following new definition of giftedness highlights the complexity of raising gifted children.

> Giftedness is *asynchronous development* in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. This asynchrony increases with higher intellectual capacity. The uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching and counseling in order for them to develop optimally. (The Columbus Group, 1991, in Morelock, 1992)

Asynchrony means being out of sync, both internally and externally. *Asynchronous development* means that gifted children develop cognitively at a much faster rate than they develop physically and emotionally, posing some interesting problems. For example, ideas forged by 8-year-old minds may be difficult to produce with 5-year-old hands. Further, advanced cognition often makes gifted children aware of information that they are not yet emotionally ready to handle. They tend to experience all of life with greater intensity, rendering them emotionally complex. These children usually do not fit the developmental norms for their age; they have more advanced play interests and often are academically far ahead of their age peers. The brighter the child, the greater the asynchrony and potential vulnerability. Therefore, parents who are aware of the inherent developmental differences of their children can prepare themselves to act as their advocates.

Recognition

Some of the earliest signs of giftedness include:

unusual alertness in infancy
less need for sleep in infancy
long attention span
high activity level
smiling or recognizing caretakers early
intense reactions to noise, pain, frustration
advanced progression through the developmental milestones
extraordinary memory
enjoyment and speed of learning
early and extensive language development
fascination with books
curiosity
excellent sense of humor
abstract reasoning and problem-solving skills
vivid imagination (e.g., imaginary companions)
sensitivity and compassion

If a child exhibits a majority of these characteristics, parents may wish to have the child assessed by an experienced examiner to find out if the child is gifted. Firstborn children tend to be recognized more often than their siblings. When one child in the family is gifted, it is quite possible that others may also be gifted. Early identification is recommended (ages 3 through 8) because it permits early intervention, as important for gifted as for any other children with special needs.

Responsive Parenting

Children learn first from their parents. Parents who spend time with their gifted child are more able to tune in to their child's interests and respond by offering appropriate educational enrichment opportunities. It is important that parents read to their children frequently, even when the children are capable of reading to themselves. In the early years, parents can help their children discover their personal interests, expose their children to their own interests, and encourage their children to learn about a wide variety of subjects such as art, nature, music, museums, and sports. Children who are attracted to a particular area need opportunities to explore that field in depth. Home stimulation and support of interests is vital to the development of talents. Following the lead of the child will help the child flourish.

Family Relationships

Gifted children often can exhaust and overwhelm a new mother and father. Gifted infants often sleep less than other babies and require extra stimulation when they are awake. It is helpful to have extended family in the home, grandparents who live nearby, a close community of friends or relatives, or a teenager in the neighborhood who can spend some time with the child so that the primary caretakers can get some rest to do other things. For single parents, such support is particularly important. From the

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time they can talk, gifted children are constantly asking questions and often challenge authority. "Do it because I said so" doesn't work with these children. Generally, parents who take the time to explain requests get more cooperation than do more authoritarian parents. If these children are spoken to and listened to with consideration and respect, they tend to respond respectfully.

As children get older, a *family meeting* can be a good way of sharing responsibility and learning negotiation skills. Family meetings can provide a forum where children have a voice as a family member, and provide avenues for avoiding power struggles that otherwise can occur. It is important for gifted children to feel emotionally supported by the family—even when there are disagreements.

School Placement

Gifted children generally benefit by spending at least some time in the classroom with children of similar abilities. Their educational program should be designed to foster progress at their own rate of development. Parents who become involved with the school can help administrators and teachers be responsive to the needs of these children. Open, flexible environments provide students with opportunities for choices, and enhance independence and creativity. "In Search of the Perfect Program" (Silverman & Leviton, 1991) includes a checklist of specific qualities to look for in a school.

Early entrance or other forms of acceleration may be considered when the school gifted program is not sufficiently challenging or when there is no opportunity for gifted children to be grouped with age peers who are intellectually advanced. Early entrance is the easiest form of acceleration, academically and socially. It may be best to accelerate girls before third grade or after ninth grade, when they are less bonded to their peer group. Boys are usually more willing to skip grades at any point in their school program. Excellent guidelines for acceleration are provided by Feldhusen (1992). When a child expresses a willingness to be accelerated, the chances are good that an excellent social adjustment will be made.

In the preschool and primary years, mixed-aged groupings are beneficial, as long as the gifted child is not the oldest in the group. Gifted, creative boys are often held back in the primary years because of so-called "immaturity"—the inability to socialize with age peers who are less developmentally advanced. When a 5-year-old boy with an 8-year-old mind cannot relate to 5-year-olds, nothing is gained by having him repeat a grade: he is then a 6-year-old with a 9-year-old mind trying to relate to 5-year-olds! The best solution is to find him true peers—boys his own age who are intellectually advanced. Retention is *not* recommended.

Parent Advocacy

Gifted children need strong, responsible advocates, and parent groups can make a difference. It takes persistence of large groups of parents to assure that provisions for gifted children are kept firmly in place. Parents of children who are gifted need opportunities to share parenting experiences with each other, and parent groups can provide a place where that can happen.

It is important for parents of any children with special needs to meet with the teachers early in the school year. When parents and teachers work together, appropriate programs can be developed and problems can be caught early. It is helpful for parents to offer to assist their child's teacher by making or locating supplemental materials, helping in the classroom or library, offering expertise to small groups of students, or finding others who can provide other enrichment experiences. Effective parents stay involved in their children's education and informed about gifted education in general. When a teacher makes a special effort to understand or assist a gifted child, a note to the teacher or to the principal is generally appreciated.

Conclusion

The key to raising gifted children is respect: respect for their uniqueness, respect for their opinions and ideas, respect for their dreams. Gifted children need parents who are responsive and flexible, who will go to bat for them when they are too young to do so for themselves. It is painful for parents to watch their children feeling out of sync with others, but it is unwise to emphasize too greatly the importance of fitting in. Children get enough of that message in the outside world. At home, children need to know that their uniqueness is cherished and that they are appreciated as persons just for being themselves.

Additional Reading

An annotated list of books, journals, and other reading material can be obtained from CEC/ERIC at the address listed below, or from one of the following organizations:

The Association for the Gifted
c/o Ella May Gogel, Parent representative
2216 Main Street
Cedar Falls, IA 50613

Supporting Emotional Needs of Gifted (SENG)
School of Professional Psychology—Wright State University
Ellis Human Development Institute
9 North Edwin C. Moses Boulevard
Dayton, OH 45407
513/873-4300

References

Feldhusen, J. F. (1992). Early admission and grade advancement for young gifted learners. *The Gifted Child Today, 15*(2), 45-49.

Morelock, M. (1992) Giftedness: The view from within. *Understanding Our Gifted, 4*(3), 1, 11-15.

Silverman, L. K., & Leviton, L. P. (1991). Advice to parents in search of the perfect program. *The Gifted Child Today, 14*(6), 31-34.

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